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The Beach with the Sand: Reflections on Israel

In 1984, Nobel Prize winner and Israeli peace activist Amos Oz wrote one of the best books to date on the State of Israel entitled, "In the Land of Israel." It is a short book, a compilation of interviews with Israelis throughout the country that gives the outsider a taste of Israel's diversity. Ten years after the publication of his seminal work, he wrote a short reflection on what could be gleaned from his initial tour of his homeland, "Today, I am more convinced than ever that no collection of conversations and impressions can possibly represent the spirit and atmosphere of a period of time or of an entire country." What brilliant and essential humility. One of Israel's greatest writers, a man who has lived in the country his whole life, acknowledges what lesser educated ideologues fail to comprehend about the Jewish State: there is no essence -- evil or righteous -- to Israel, just as there is no essence to any diverse, democratic country.

There are people, with stories, and together they comprise a mosaic filled with jagged, ill-fitting pieces. As we pan out, we see the beauty and unruly chaos of an artwork made of colorful shards of broken pottery, shattered and stunning people. Some pieces are beautiful and others are grotesque, but all we know for sure is that they will never come together into a coherent picture, and this mosaic will continue to grow and evolve. The story of Israel is a human story, a story of a nation of refugees -- their children, and grandchildren -- Arab and Jewish -- who strive, succeed, and fail daily to build and maintain a democratic, Jewish country in a region increasingly consumed with violence and disdain for pluralism. It is a country of 7 million stories, and the most we can do is tell some of those stories. Today, I will describe some of the pieces in the mosaic that have touched, inspired, and disturbed me

on my last trip to Israel. All of them teach me something important about my homeland, and the type of person, and Jew I hope to become.

1) **A Child in the Sand:** My last two days in Israel, I spent with MK Ruth Calderon. One evening on the beach in Tel Aviv, and one day at the kneset in Jerusalem. On our drive to the beach, I told Ruth that something in Israel feels different now. The bodies of four innocent teenage boys had just been discovered -- all killed in cold blood -- Eyal, Naftali, Gil-Ad, Muhammed. And yet, we went to the beach. To walk, to talk, to eat watermelon and bulgarian cheese, to watch to sun set. Because that is what you do in Israel on the eve of war. It was what you do in Israel during war. It what you do every day. The beach was packed, and as I sought to have a deep philosophical discussion with Ruth about Zionism, Israel-US relations, Judaism -- there was a this naked baby who kept on throwing sand on the one clean pair of pants I had with me, that I was intending to wear during my trip to the kneset the next day. Not going to lie, I was getting pretty annoyed, and it showed on my face, as I shot the naked baby and his grandmother a pretty pissed look. The grandma, a woman who looked gorgeous and tan in her late 70's had these words, "אני מצטערת — אבל היום כולם רוצים הכול נטול — הקפה, החורף, החיים." This is a difficult sentence to translate, but it is so important that I'll try. "I'm sorry - today everyone wants everything "*natul*" -- meaning with the problematic or difficult parts taken away -- decaf coffee, a beach without sand, a life without risk."

2) **The tweens on the train:** There was a group of 5 12-year old girls sitting by themselves with no adult on the train to the mall in central Tel Aviv. I assume that they were from the suburbs because they

were on the train and not walking to Israel's commercial center. I thought to myself, I cannot imagine this happening today in America. Even though America is safer now than ever, the media leads everyone to think the opposite. And Israel, well it is safer and more dangerous than ever at the same time. Israel has very little street crime, but it is a country surrounded by many people who would like nothing more than to kidnap or kill Israeli civilians. But here I am looking at five 12-year-old girls talking about One-Direction and boys, heading, alone, into the heart of Israel's largest metropolis. This is the great contradiction -- in this embattled country lives a people that ranks consistently at the top of global standards for well-being: Israelis are happier, healthier, and live much longer than Americans. Why? I believe it is because they refuse to be threatened or to cower in fear from threats, real or imaginary. That inspires me.

3) **Route 443 with Ruth:** There are two roads from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, route 1 and route 443. Route 1 has much more traffic and takes you to the Western edge of Israel's capital. Route 443 has less much traffic and takes you right to the knesset building -- it also runs through Palestinian villages in the West Bank, bookended by two military checkpoints. We took Route 443. Ruth and I were listening to debates on the radio about how to best react to rocket fire coming from Gaza, but our reception was fuzzy. Every 2-3 minutes the Hebrew debate was drowned out by Arabic music coming from the surrounding Palestinian radio stations. Reception was poor.

4) **"We don't have time for that" - dispatches from an absurd birthright trip:** Our tour-guide took the role of "teacher" on one of our first days on the trip, and told a simplistic history of the Zionist-Arab conflict that was as offensive as it was facile. I've spoken to other folks who have participated in birthright -- apparently this is not normal -- he was just unusually dishonest, simplistic,

and cynical. At the end of his “lesson”, he told the students that they could ask **any** questions they wanted about the Israel. One of our students, Ben, asked him to talk about the “price-tag” attacks throughout Israel and the West Bank. Right-wing Jewish youth for many years now have been seeking revenge by terrorizing innocent Palestinians in the West Bank, desecrating mosques and churches in Israel, and scrawling racist graffiti throughout the country. Our tour guide responded, “I don’t have time for that question. It is a small group, and their crimes are overblown.” Less than a week later, Muhammed Abu Khadir’s body was found. He was a Palestinian teenager on his way home from mosque, kidnapped and burned alive by Jewish teenagers who wanted revenge for the three Jewish teenagers killed by Hamas terrorists. But we don’t have time for that.

5) **A day at the kneset:** Few people, kneset members or citizens, listen to the speeches during the plenum at the kneset. I was curious. The plenum began with Arab MKs screamed to a largely empty room about the many injustices they face as citizens, and the evils of the occupation. Jewish Labor MK (Member of Knesset) Merav Michaeli tried to offer her support and solidarity, but they weren’t particularly interested in it. The other Jewish MKs were checking their email and texting. Apparently, this happens every day in the kneset, and the script rarely changes. It is at once sad theater and a testament to the resilience of Israeli democracy. But one man did deviate from the script, MK Israel Eichler. He was a representative from United Torah Judaism, an ultra-Orthodox party in Israel, usually considered to be part of the right-wing block of the kneset, though it is hard to put Israeli political parties in those kinds of boxes. While Jewish MKs of all parties decried and denounced the murder of Muhammed Abu Khadir, his words stood out. He just got up and told a story told to him by his rebbe. His rebbe’s whole family was killed by the Nazis -- his wife and 13 children during the Holocaust. A

Nazi guard comes up to him and says, “do you still think you are one of the chosen people?” He said, “Yes. Because even after you have killed my whole family, I could never do what you have done. I could never kill anyone, not even you, in cold blood. That is what it means to be chosen.” And then MK Eichler left the podium and sat down.

6) **#Bring Back Our Boys.** When Gil-ad, Naftali, and Eyal went missing, a campaign begun. Jews and our allies worldwide held up signs on social media demanding the return of our three innocent souls who were just looking for a ride home. Eventually our boys were found dead and disfigured under a mound of rocks. The IDF brought them back not as boys, but as corpses, as heros, as symbols of an innocence lost over and over again, as the physical manifestation of the cost to be a free people in our land. But they aren't our only boys. Muhammed Abu Khadir is one of our boys too; the Israeli government has announced that his family is entitled to all the rights and privileges that any other family of an Israeli terror victim receives. And, the boys who killed Muhammed are our boys too. The Druze (Arab) soldier who is the head of the Golani brigade in the *Israeli Defense Forces*, and against medical advice left the hospital in the middle of Operation Protective Edge to rejoin his soldiers in Gaza, is our boy too. Mohammad Zoabi who risked his life by expressing solidarity with the kidnapped boys, and condemned Hamas, as a proud Israeli Arab Zionist teen, is our boy too. And his aunt, a member of kneset who expresses solidarity with Hamas is ours too. They are all ours. They are all jagged, ill-fitting pieces in the crazy, beautiful, incoherent mosaic that is Israel. It is all ours to celebrate, to mourn, to struggle to figure out, to claim and to own. There are no beaches without sand.

And yet, there are always moments of hope and glimmers of peace -- rarely covered by the media, but always in the corner of your eye as you walk Israel's streets. Yossi Klein Halevi had this

message about a multi-faith music festival planned by the NGO: Jersusalem Season of Culture, “A miracle is happening this week in Jerusalem, an intimation of Isaiah's prophecy of the nations gathering in prayer in Jerusalem. The Festival of Sacred Music has drawn dozens of musicians from around the world. They're from Brazil and Ethiopia and Burkino Faso and even Morocco. Two weeks after the Gaza ceasefire, while much of the world is busy turning Israel into a pariah, spiritual musicians from around the world are here, playing sacred music.

...Hundreds packed into the outdoor stands in the courtyard of the Tower of David, to hear Israel's greatest rocker sing the devotional songs of this penitential season..... Don't miss the rest of the festival. There are messianic moments happening in Jerusalem under the guise of a cultural event.”

Even in our homeland’s darkest moments, there are still glimmers of Israel’s best self -- providing hope and insight into what is possible in our small country. This year in 5775, I leave you with a few incongruent pieces. The coffee with the caffeine, the beach with the sand, the life with risk. May we always remember to never lose sight of all the pieces of this mosaic, each story, each human, each contradiction, and remember it is all ours...and let us live accordingly.

Shannah Tovah, Gmar Hatimah Tovah. May we all be inscribed in the book of life.